

Fastballs and Forestry

By *James P. Jeter*, Registered Forester
Forest Management Specialist, Alabama Forestry Commission

Photo by Mike Kyser

Two things happened the other day that caused me to reflect on the status of my forestry career. The first event causing this reflection was a question asked by a Boy Scout instructor as I gave a talk on careers in forestry and/or natural resource management and basic merit badge requirements. The question was: What do you like most about your job? Ever heard that one before? I used to answer that question pretty quickly, but after 32 years I had to think about the answer a little. My ultimate answer was, trying to help landowners solve their land management problems . . . i.e., problem solving.

The other event happened later that same evening as I watched the Tennessee Lady Vols play Arizona for the National Summer 2007

Softball Division I title. Monica Abbott, who was pitching for the Lady Vols, was quoted as saying that when she was in high school, pitching for her “was all about speed and power.” Now that she is playing at a new level, she has had to learn that “there have to be more pitches than just a fastball.” She went on to say that “ball placement, timing, and a particular batter” all help her make up her mind on “which pitch to make.” Sounds a lot like problem solving to me.

One might ask how this relates to forestry and my forest management career. Well, early on as a new forestry graduate I was given a job with a land management company dealing with private landowners. My bosses were all very old, at least 50 at the time. In most

cases my decisions were based on what and how they told me to do things. I did not realize until later how valuable my two years with those “old” men would be . . . they were problem solving and I was their major project. They were coaching me along.

My next assignment was on a management area dealing with all aspects of forestry, from procurement and logging contract supervision to prescribed burning and boundary line maintenance. Boy, was I ready to go. I had two years of experience and knew everything, except how much I did *not* know. I was throwing fastballs all the time, head high. Thank goodness for the patience of my “coaches” and their ability to cope with

(Continued on page 8)

Fastballs and Forestry

(Continued from page 7)

such a knucklehead. From older, wiser, hardworking independent contractors, to some of the men I supervised, they all had a part in coaching me along. They taught me how to pitch, not just throw fastballs.

Now, as I have a little hair left and it is truly gray, I have started to see some things that help me decide which pitch to throw. Think about the environmental events that have taken place in the last 12 months, or are taking place presently. The drought of 2006 . . . what effects did it have on seedling survival — hardwood and/or pine? What really stopped the Ips

Engraver Beetle outbreak after one life cycle? Why did the Ips strike in a given pattern vs. random spots? Are these outbreaks ever just random spots? Where are the Southern Pine Beetles that usually follow the Ips? How much stress was put on upland hardwood stands? Why are mature hardwoods dying in major river

basins? How long did the drought last?

Fast forward a little bit to the last few weeks of March 2007. The afternoon temperatures are in the high 70s and sometimes near 80. Vegetation is green and the turkeys are starting to gobble. Then comes the first week of April and sub-freezing temperatures — what a curve ball. The turkeys quit and the green foliage turned brown. I have never observed the hardwoods being burned by cold weather as they were this spring. What problems will this present? Which pitch do I throw when asked questions about the results of this freeze?

Simple stuff that we often take for granted . . . the white oaks were flowering, getting ready to set acorns for this year's crop — for the most part, all gone. What does this matter except for a few hungry deer? Well, it probably does



Photos by Mike Kyser

not matter, unless you were counting on a good acorn crop to help you naturally regenerate a hardwood stand. What about next year's red oak acorn crop? Will it suffer the same failure? What about the fruit-bearing trees for wildlife, not to mention human consumption? Basically gone.

What effect did this freeze have on newly planted seedlings? It should not have bothered most pine seedlings. However, those being planted during this time were not only planted late, but I have heard of some having ice on them when they were planted. Ice on

seedlings before they're in the ground is never good. Look out, another curve ball. Hardwood seedlings, in some cases, had already leafed out. The freeze defoliated some of these seedlings which should and have re-foliated by now. The

question is, how much added stress did this put on those seedlings . . . ball or strike? Time will tell. Will we all remember the week of cold weather that preceded the drought of 2007?

At 17 inches behind in rainfall by June, what pitch can we be looking for?

Will the pine stands that got a little hot from prescribed fires make it through without a Southern Pine Beetle attack? We better watch close. Will the wildfires get worse and kill trees? You bet. Is it all gloom and doom? Never.

So what can we do?

How about problem solving . . . decide which pitch to throw to prevent the other team from beating you. Good forest management will prevent detrimental results from a lot of the curve balls that are thrown our way . . . proper site selection for the proper species to be planted; proper site preparation before planting; proper timber sale planning; and careful observance of what is actually going on in your forest. All of the decisions you make now may prevent catastrophic events from raining out your ballgame.

In the days and months to come, we will be faced with many forest management problems that need to be solved. Prescribed burning, reforestation, timber sales, Best Management Practices (BMPs), insects, disease, and forest tax information are just a few of the areas with which we at the Alabama Forestry Commission can help you. As I am in the seventh inning of what I hope to be an extra inning ballgame, I want to continue to sharpen my pitching skills and not be content with just throwing fastballs. ♣